

ELECTIONS

Milwaukee absentee ballot drop boxes to be replaced this week with permanent versions

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New City of Milwaukee absentee ballot drop boxes are being installed. This is one at the Milwaukee Election Commission's warehouse at 1901 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. *Michael Sears / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Milwaukee's 15 absentee ballot drop boxes will be replaced this week with versions that are sturdier, longer-lasting and have important security features, according to the city's top election official.

The first box was replaced Monday at 1901 S. Kinnickinnic Ave.

"I don't expect that we'll see a huge decrease in absentee voting" in future elections, Milwaukee Election Commission Executive Director Claire Woodall-Vogg said during a meeting of the Common Council's Judiciary and Legislation Committee on Monday. "I think this will become the new normal as it often is in states where voters discover how convenient it is to vote at home."

The permanent boxes had been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, an increase in demand and wildfires close to the manufacturer, according to the city.

The boxes will be installed by Department of Public Works staff, who will be accompanied by staff from the city's Election Commission to retrieve ballots from the old boxes. New security seals will be installed on the new boxes. No security problems have been reported with the temporary boxes.

Voters can return their absentee ballots to the drop boxes until 7:30 p.m. on Election Day, Nov. 3. That's a half-hour before the in-person polls close to allow time for the ballots to be delivered for counting by 8 p.m. as required under state law.

The city has also taken steps to ensure absentee ballots reach voters, she told the committee, including working more closely with the U.S. Postal Service and eliminating a third-party mail provider for absentee ballots.

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The Wisconsin Elections Commission has also started using "intelligent mail barcodes," she said, which allows for better tracking of absentee ballots through the mail system.

The city has seen fewer phone calls this election from voters who said they never received their ballots, she told the committee.

And Stan Franke of USPS expressed confidence in the Postal Service's ability to carry out the election, saying he wasn't aware of any issues at this point.

"We're very confident in our ability to effectively have a successful election this cycle," Franke said, including getting the influx of absentee ballots to the city's central count by 8 p.m. on Election Day.

She was also asked about security for the election.

Woodall-Vogg said the biggest threat on election night will be misinformation about election results on social media. To combat that, the city plans to live stream central count, where absentee ballots will be counted on Election Day, she said.

The city could see as many as 175,000 absentee ballots.

As of 1:10 p.m. Monday, the city had issued 151,741 absentee ballots and had 112,969 of those returned. That figure includes ballots cast through early voting.

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The state, FBI and U.S. Department of Homeland Security have not alerted the city to any foreign interference, including with the voter database, Woodall-Vogg said.

The city has seen no voter intimidation at any of its early voting locations, and law enforcement has shared no elevated concerns with her regarding issues anticipated the day-of, she told the Journal Sentinel.

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